

Addendum (May, 2009)

Many have asked me if I have written part 2 of my report on COTH dealing more specifically with the doctrinal concerns in more depth. I have not, but will do as led.

COTH is growing in numbers. That indeed could be a very positive thing. In fact, COTH was featured in the news recently as one of the fastest growing mega-churches in the U.S. But keep in mind Joel Osteen's church has 40,000 plus members but many, if not most, are coming for the wrong reasons and message – a consumerism, feel good Christianity.

Another potentially positive sign is that COTH claims thousands of new converts per year. This far exceeds any church I am aware of – if indeed these are real conversions. An old friend of mine who is very committed to Evangelism Explosion (EE) was drawn to COTH because of their availability to start EE small groups. But after 6 months of attendance he was more and more discouraged that he did not hear Chris Hodges have an emphasis on repentance as a necessary response to the gospel message being presented.

When he expressed this concern to Chris, he suggested that my friend may not be happy there. Repentance is in fact a necessary response; otherwise, one would easily be presented and “easy believism” narcissistic “gospel.”

COTH has an aggressive plan and short history of planting churches. This is a wonderful goal. One concern, though, is whether there are spiritually mature and experienced leaders being generated through COTH to provide mature leadership for these church plants.

Another concern is that COTH and its plants become Chris Hodges centered and personality driven. I understand that the sermons at the church plants are either simulcasts of Chris's sermons or are his DVD sermons. I have the same concern about any church that does this, not just COTH.

Small Groups

One of the practical or pragmatic strengths of COTH is their approach to visitor assimilation. Chris continues in the “free-market” approach to attracting visitors through affinity or like-interest small groups.

One of the challenging areas for churches is in following up and connecting visitors. A proven method is in promoting like-interest groups. This is a very helpful outreach strategy as well. COTH has over 600 of these small groups organized in a very accessible book to visitors with leaders' contact information.

My concern is that there is only a 3-hour “training” for those small group “leaders.” And I am not aware of any real accountability to the church staff.

In other words, if someone has a passion or interest in an activity (sports, spiritual, hobby), they can apply and start it. With the free market mindset and very minimal doctrinal parameters, these small groups can range from very good Biblically sound topics, to controversial or heretical ones.

There are many very good (at least on paper) small group topics listed in the Winter/Spring 2009 Directory. I am acquainted and friends with several of the leaders of those groups.

Some of these positive groups are the Discovery Club, numerous prayer groups, Boy Scouts, First Priority, Daniel Cason Inner City, Hispanic Outreach, Crown Financial, Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University, Celebrate Recovery, and many more. COTH even has a couple of apologetics small groups. Praise the Lord!

But mixed in are several questionable studies and some very troublesome ones. And as I reviewed the 600 small groups listed, I only found 3 groups listed that were studying actual books of the Bible (Mark and Hebrews, and Daniel by Beth Moore). There were a number that described their content as "studying the Word", or "Bible study and prayer," and "Word time." Many of the groups are hobby or "same station of life" activities such as music, tennis, child-rearing, etc.

The controversial and heretical studies are BabyWise by the Ezzos, materials by Derek Prince, Neil Anderson's Freedom in Christ series, and a study by the false prophet Dutch Sheets. A blatant example of my concern of the "free market" downplay of the importance of sound doctrine and lack of accountability regarding maturity and subject choices of the small group leaders is the fact that the writings of heretics like Joyce Meyer and Gloria Copeland are allowed. So here we have sound financial direction from Crown and Dave Ramsey, yet in the same church are sanctioned the name-it, claim-it, Word-Faith heretics.

The Scripture explicitly warns and directs His Church in this saying, "Let not many of you become teachers" as that responsibility in leading or misleading others bears strict accountability (James 3:1).

Paul exhorts Timothy to "study to show yourselves approved, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). He also directs us to entrust these things (sound doctrine) to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

God gives us many serious warnings about false teachings and false teachers. It is a major concern for the church whose priority is to utilize Scripture for reproof, correction, training in righteousness, and to make believers competent and equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16). Also, see 2 Tim. 4:3-4; 1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:9-11; 2:1-5; Heb. 5:12-14; 2 Pet. 2:1-3.

Paul begins his letters to pastor Timothy with a solemn urging to make sure the teachers in his church teach sound doctrine,

warning that many indulge in a strange mixture of truth and error (1 Tim. 4, 1 Tim. 6:3, 2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Yet, when I read the description and content of COTH's Church 101, 201, 301, and "leadership's Dream Team 401," the process of training is very shallow and brief. Yes, the "seeker sensitive" like-interest groups are attractive but there must be systematic instruction in sound doctrine along with the interest passions of outreach and inreach to the body.

In COTH's "Small Group Leadership Training" manual, the requirements for a small group "leader" are to (1) attend the 3 hour leadership orientation and go through a fill-in-the-blank manual, (2) complete a small group application and interview, (3) attend training as scheduled and meet regularly with a coach. Another requirement is to tithe to COTH. Part of the concern is that the "coach" and "zone leaders" are lay people. What is their level of maturity and accountability?

The leader application form asks if you tithe, are you a born-again Christian?, and minimal doctrinal agreements (of which the Trinity and gospel/ salvation requirements are not included. What is included is the question "When did you receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit?" This is an unfortunate doctrinal error I covered in the first paper.

Another potentially problematic erroneous doctrinal commitment written in the manual is to the Five Fold Ministry (again written about in the first paper.) The specific problem is the recognition of the office and authority of Prophets and Apostles to be adhered to in the Church today.

There is another area where the "jury is still out." It has come to my attention that COTH is using the Cleansing Stream course material in their matrix. Cleansing Stream has some very serious error along with some good. I was told by a dear friend who is involved in this study that COTH had rewritten some of it. I look forward to examining the version used by COTH.

Again, this is a very difficult process for me as I am very much in agreement with some things COTH is doing and that other evangelical churches are not. But the good must not be an attraction into exposure to the error and heresy. I still long for a synergy with those other great evangelical churches (who also are not perfect) with COTH.

Dream Center-Woodlawn

On a more positive note, COTH has targeted the Woodlawn area to transform it with a multifaceted kingdom-minded strategy of engagement. Through the centralized facility, the Dream Center, COTH is setting up a medical and dental clinic, partnering with Sav-a-Life, Lovelady, and other ministries to reach and redeem that

community with the words of the gospel and through gospel deeds of mercy and restoration. Amen!

A concern I have with any church leadership is a lack of accountability. I wrote about this concern at COTH in my first paper. There is actually a convergence of several strong concerns at COTH.

One of them is the accountability issue. Chris is the CEO at COTH and as he said in the past, he had/ has five men he is accountable to. But these men live in other states. One of the “overseers” for Chris was Ted Haggard. This surfaces problems in several areas.

The first is obvious. Ted Haggard has been living a secret life of homosexuality. Even when exposed, he tried to deny it and cover it up. It is certainly true that the deception and lack of discernment and revelation was not limited to Chris Hodges. Haggard was accepted as president of the National Association of Evangelicals for a while too.

But Chris was on staff with Haggard and was close to him. Yet Chris, who believes in the 5-Fold Ministry and supernatural gifts of prophecy and words of knowledge, did not know Haggard was involved in this sin?

This is accountability?

Haggard was also the source of Chris’ “free market” approach to ministry. When I met with Chris, he told me that if I wanted to understand his philosophy of ministry—read these three books by Ted Haggard (which he gave me). In the November 2005 issue of *Christianity Today*, there was a feature story on Ted Haggard and his ministry. In it was a focus on Haggard’s free-market approach to ministry.

Haggard’s New Life Church “offers hundreds of small group activities.” The writer asked, “How do the pastors decide what to include? They don’t. If someone comes up with an idea and the person passes a basic screening, the church will promote the group...leaving the details to the people who write their own program.” Talk about potentially (and in reality) the blind leading the blind. Was this a Spirit-led ministry?

The article went on to express concern about a “religion-lite baptizing the American Dream” and “wrapping free-market individualism around the cross, confusing materialism and personal happiness with spiritual riches. The new evangelicalism that Haggard represents suffers such temptations—most obviously in the prosperity gospel.”

Haggard was considered an apostle by the 5-Fold leadership. There are others that are false prophets and apostles that are still connected to COTH. They are Dutch Sheets, John Paul Stevens, Rick Joyner, Bill Hamon and others. Another revealing embarrassment for

the “prophetics” is Paul Cain, a major “prophet,” who was also finally exposed as having a long-time homosexual life.